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ABSTRACT

The equalization of educational opportunity, the achievement of a greater degree of equity, is a central concern of educators today. The way in which this concern is conceptualized can have a great influence on the extent to which the concern is translated into programs, and on the way programs ultimately address the problem that gave rise to the concern in the first place. The national problem posed by a concern with equity is that of making educational and social development as well as participation in society and survival, independent of the backgrounds from which differential status group members come. Educators must rise to the challenge by manning a two-pronged effort: to insure equality in the distribution of educational resources, and to insure equal protection in the distribution of resources in relation to social group characteristics. This would also be in relation to functional group characteristics as may be determined by mental, physical, and social conditions and as may be reflected in the processes by which learning behaviors and developmental choices are mediated. A concept such as equal opportunity may not be sufficient to make educational and other achievements independent of ethnic groups, race, or sex, and a concept such as human diversity with social justice is preferred. (Author/AM)

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Teachers College, Columbia University August 1976

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY REVIEW

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education

Institute for Urban and Minority Education

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Toward an Understanding of Educational Equity

Edmund W. Gordon

The 1960's saw an enormous upsurge of interest in the concept of equal educational opportunity, particularly for ethnic minority group members, females, children of low-income families, and children for whom the standard English dialect is a second language system. Although the political pressures and momentum of the sixties have subsided somewhat, the concept of equality of opportunity continues to prevail. Educators' thinking about equality of opportunity has emphasized ethnic, language, sex, and SES group membership. In an early expression of the concept, emphasis was given to alleged deficits in these groups as compared with a hypothesized norm—usually interpreted to be that of white male English-speaking middle class. Political sensitivity led to a de-emphasis on deficits and disadvantagement and an emphasis on differences. This concern for differences led to a renewed recognition that we are a society of pluralistic values and of diverse peoples and that these diverse peoples need to be served by the society with a greater degree of equity.

The equalization of educational opportunity—the achievement of a greater degree of equity (fairness, even-handedness, impartiality)—then is a central concern of educators today. However, the way in which this concern is conceptualized can have a great influence on the extent to which the concern is translated into programs and on the way programs ultimately address the problem that gave rise to the concern in the first place. That problem continues to plaque us. It is manifested in the fact that in our democratic society, educational achievement seems to be irreversibly tied to ethnic caste status, economic class status, to the status of one's proficiency in the standard English dialect, and to some extent to status imposed as a function of gender, or as a function of level of socialization.

The national problem posed by a concern with equity is that of making educational and social development, and ultimately social/political/economic participation and survival, independent of the backgrounds from which differential status group members come. It may be that this is the ultimate test of the viability of a democratic, diverse, and pluralistic society. Unfortunately, there are no ideal models that can be followed. The U.S.A. is the first society deliberately to set about creating a democratic nation from a population of diverse ethnic, national, racial, and religious groups. The society has alternatingly—and sometimes simultaneously—stressed either unitary or pluralistic standards; diversity and pluralism are the current dominant themes. It is to the maintenance and advancement of a democratic society made up of diverse peoples and committed to pluralistic standards and social justice that education increasingly is expected to contribute.

We as educators must rise to the challenge by making a two-pronged effort. The first line of effort, and one prescribed by law, is to insure fairness, equality—"equal protection"—in the distribution of the nation's educational resources to ethnic, cultural, economic, geographic, language, racial, religious, and sex groups as members of those groups present themselves for service from institutions serving the public. Since equity at this level means equal treatment, we face the problem of how to reduce or eliminate educational neglect of some subgroups in our population and the inequitable distribution of known treatments and available resources across the varied populations served by education, i.e. how to better enable our institutions of education to provide equal protection—equal service to all of their clintele. Solutions to this problem are most likely to take the form of changes in laws, regulations, policies, budgets, etc., which affect opportunity for access. These solutions may also involve changes in the organization and structure of educational service delivery systems; systemic changes in the agencies and institutions of education; and changes in the control and management of these systems. The goal is to make available to all the best that the state provides to any particular segment of the population, with a high degree of consistency across subpopulations.

The second line of effort that educators must follow is as yet not so clearly defined in law. It involves fairness, equality—"equal protection"—in the distribution of resources in relation to *social* group characteristics but also in relation to such *functional*

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group characteristics as may be determined by mental/physical/social conditions and as may be reflected in the processes by which learning behaviors and developmental choices are mediated. It is here that differences in language systems and their utilization come into focus and that the law is increasingly interpreted to require that the design and content of the curriculum more appropriately reflect the functional (viz linguistic) characteristics of the learners. It is also here that the appropriateness of the learning situation is being brought under scrutiny to determine its relevance for other functional learner characteristics that may require attention if a thorough and adequate education is to be provided.

Since equity at this level implies social justice—appropriateness and sufficiency of service to achieve some common criterion without limiting the privilege to exceed that standard—we face the problem of correcting inadequately developed treatments and insufficiently allocated resources to meet the differential requirements essential to the achievement of an agreed upon level of competence (thorough and adequate education). The problem posed here takes us beyond policy, regulation, management, budget, political, and economic considerations (but includes these) to a concern with the person-environment-situation interactions that determine outcomes. The concern here is with functional aspects of the institution, functional aspects of the learner, and needs of the human and nonhuman vectors in that ecological system. The problem involves analysis of, design of, and continuous involvement in the adjustment of institutions, people, and services. The goal is to make available to each that which is essential to the achievement of the criterion.

Turning back to the first line of effort, we see that the courts have quite adequately enunciated the problem in ruling that unequal access by subgroups of the population to the public educational resources of the state is unlawful. Educational institutions are thus required to stop the arbitrary segregation of pupils grouped by race or ethnicity; to end their failure to provide sufficient instruction to speakers of English as a second language; to end their failure to provide educational options and services for females that are as rich as those available to males; and to end their failure to deal adequately with students whom the schools view as disruptive or incompatible. In correcting conditions like these, what educators are doing is trying to change the validity of existing predictions by introducing corrections for the failures or errors of the system. This strategy is based on the assumption that much of what we currently deliver or know how to deliver can greatly improve the function of, possibly, a majority of our pupils. What Bloom and Clarke, commenting from different perspectives, have suggested is that we have targeted these efforts on too limited a number of pupils and often on select groups of pupils. Bloom argues that generic interventions directed at correcting schooling errors seem to have the possibility for bringing as many as 80% of our pupils to the level of criterion mastery. As described, his corrective intervention involves the policy decision to allocate progressively more instructional time in relation to demonstrated difficulty with criterion mastery. As a starter, this strategy would insure that all pupils have exposure to that which we know how to deliver. This systemic change begins to acquire individual specificity as time of exposure is influenced by differential pupil need. Those pupils in need of greater exposure would receive it, in order to facilitate development as a corrective intervention or as an enrichment strategy.

The problems posed by differential pupil characteristics, conditions, needs, and response patterns led to the enunciation of Coleman's theory that school achievement should be made independent of the social conditions and prior social status of the pupil. Coleman was sensitive primarily to differences in social class and ethnic caste. In pursuit of solutions to these problems, we may have focused too sharply on their political dimensions and insufficiently on their pedagogical dimensions. It may be that as important as are ethnicity, SES, language, sex, even geographic origin, as group indicators for political purposes, they are too gross and may be irrelevant as functional indicators for purposes of pedagogical design and planning. For example, what does the fact that a child's skin is brown tell the school about the design of learning experiences for her, and even worse, what does that skin color variable tell the school about how a specific child goes about solving a problem in learning? Yet, large proportions of our investigations and efforts at curriculum adaptation have been directed at ethnicity as defined by skin color or at language identity as an indicator variable in planning and organizing school programs. Similar practices occur in relation to social class and gender. Now there may be aspects of biologic sex and social gender that have more or less direct implications for learning behavior and the design of learning experiences. Increasingly, however, the evidence mounts in support of the assertion that there are dimensions of human diversity that appear to have high relevance for pedagogy that vary as much within language, ethnic, and class groups as between them. Cognitive style, interest, motivation, aspiration, temperament, and learning rate are but a few of these dimensions. These are not class or ethnic or language or sex group bound variables. Increasingly, even variables related to social practice—such as child-rearing practices, support for learning, and parents' aspirations for their children—are beginning to be so heterogeneous with respect to the indicator groups as to make ethnicity, SES, and occupational status less useful than they were once thought to be as indicators of the extent to which exposure to such practice is a part of the life experience of the children identified by these group labels. The evidence increasingly suggests that there exists wide variance in the character and quality of the learning behaviors that children bring to and develop in school. It also appears (although the evidence is less clear) that the conditions under which learning and development occur influence the quality of achievement as does the character of the learning behavior evidenced. If we grant the possible validity of these two assertions it is possible to conclude that the relationships between character of the learning behavior and character (length, nature, and appropriateness, for example) of the learning conditions may be of crucial importance as determinants of the quality of achievement. If this somewhat complex statement of a rather simple conception holds, it has critical significance for conceptualizing the central issue involved in planning adequate educational programs for children of diverse human characteristics and particularly those children who traditionally have been less well-served by our educational systems—those neglected, those descriminated against, those disadvantaged.

For more than a score of years the concept "equal educational opportunity" has dominated educators' thinking. The concept grew out of court litigations around issues related to

ethnic segregation in public education and distributive inequality in resource allocation. As a result, the nation has affirmed its commitment to equality of educational opportunity for all and has translated this to mean equal access to the educational resources provided through public funds. But equal opportunity may not adequately reflect the implicit commitments of a democratic, diverse, pluralistic, and humane society. If what we are committed to is to make educational and other achievements independent of ethnic group, social class, sex group, religious group, and/or geographic group origins, a concept such as *human diversity with social justice* may be more worthy of our tradition.

Human diversity focuses our attention on those aspects of difference or variance in human characteristics that have relevance for pedagogical and developmental intervention. *Social justice* moves us beyond a concern for distributive equality to a concern for distributive sufficiency. When we speak of distributive sufficiency we are immediately forced to look to questions of *need* rather than of *sharing*. The functional educational question becomes, "What do the special characteristics of this person or group of persons require of the intervening process to enable this person to function with adequacy and satisfaction?" We are forced to ask not only what is essential but also what is sufficient to enable achievement. The answer to the question dictates the quality and the quantity of the educational intervention.

The intervention indicated by the answer to the question posed may violate our more narrow conceptions of equality—impartiality—but, given the compelling facts of human diversity, it may be the only way in which we can approach social justice. To honor, then, the implicit commitment to equality of opportunity we may be required to embrace a new commitment to the nurture of human diversity and the pursuit of social justice.

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